

Overview of the Governor’s Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families in Virginia

Background: In January 2019, Governor Northam committed Virginia to be one of the first seven states to implement the *Governor’s Suicide Prevention Challenge*. The *Challenge* is a call to action for state and local communities to implement the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) [2018-2028 National Strategy for the Prevention of Veteran Suicide](#) and is guided by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The aim of the National Strategy is to prevent suicide among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF) using a comprehensive public health approach. The Virginia Governor’s Challenge is co-led by the Secretary of Veterans and Defense Affairs, Carlos Hopkins, and the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Dr. Daniel Carey, and has developed a strategic framework, which is currently being implemented state-wide.

Key Priorities for the Governor’s Suicide Prevention Challenge:

- Identify SMVF and screen for suicide risk;
- Promote connectedness and improve care transitions; and
- Increase lethal means safety and safety planning.

The Virginia Governor’s Challenge team includes representatives from:

- Department of Veterans Affairs: VA Medical Centers (VAMCs) in Richmond (McGuire), Hampton, and Salem, Virginia; Washington D.C., Mountain Home (James H. Quillen), Tennessee; and Martinsburg, West Virginia. VA Mid-Atlantic Health Care Network (VISN 6);
- Department of Defense: Naval Medical Center Portsmouth;
- State Agencies: Virginia Department of Veterans Services (DVS), Virginia National Guard, Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), Virginia Department of Health, Virginia Department of Social Services, Virginia Department of Medical Assistance Services, Virginia State Police, and Virginia Department of Education;
- Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association;
- National Alliance on Mental Illness;
- Richmond Behavioral Health Authority (Richmond Mayor’s Suicide Prevention Challenge Lead); and
- Team Red, White, and Blue.

Virginia Governor’s Challenge Themes: the “3Cs – Care, Connect, and Communicate”:

- *Care*: The provision of accessible and culturally competent behavioral health services;
- *Connect*: Bringing SMVF-specific and community services together; forming systemic partnerships; and
- *Communicate*: Educating the SMVF population on resources and behavioral health providers on military culture and suicide prevention best practices.

Virginia Team Activity Highlights:

- Hosted regional crisis services strategic planning sessions (Crisis Intercept Mapping from SAMHSA) with Salem VAMC, Richmond VAMC, and Hampton VAMC. VHA partners were integral in the planning and implementation of these sessions, and ongoing support to regional teams;

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- Hosted Regional Military Culture and Suicide Prevention Summits in: Radford, Abingdon, Fairfax, Lexington, Suffolk, and Henrico. Over 500 community services providers were trained at these inaugural events;
 - DVS now offers virtual Military Cultural Competency (MCC) webinars and has trained over 700 community services providers since March 2020. MCC webinar training also offered to state agency Human Resources (HR) leaders;
- Distributed the Veteran Crisis Line on Governor's Challenge resource cards statewide to offices, agencies, Veterans Service Organizations, and care providers;
- Collaborated with the Department of Education and the *IServe2* campaign to raise awareness on needs and resources for military-connected children;
- Launched the *Together with Veterans* initiative (national best practice from VHA) in Southwest Virginia to bolster grass roots, veteran-led, suicide prevention in rural communities;
- Collaborated with the Virginia Army National Guard to revise the Suicide Prevention Training in a Warrior Task format that promotes core resiliency skills;
- Launched Virginia's Identify SMVF, Screen for Suicide Risk, and Refer for Services (VISR) Pilot to:
 - Provide military culture, suicide prevention, and safety planning infrastructure in state and community agencies;
 - Enhance suicide risk screening and resource connectivity for SMVF before a crisis and the delivery of life saving services in a crisis;
- Hosted online training on the Columbia Suicide Risk Screening protocol from Columbia University to increase utilization in community settings;
- Launched suicide awareness campaign with General Assembly Military and Veterans Caucus;
- Submitted cross-agency budget requests for State FY21/FY22 (pending due to COVID):
 - DBHDS – to enhance trauma-informed clinical capacity in Community Services Boards (CSBs) to provide outpatient mental health services to SMVF;
 - To expand *Lock and Talk Virginia* Lethal Means Safety Campaign to additional CSBs and National Guard;
 - DVS – to expand peer and family support and benefits services; and
- Distributed COVID-19 safety and resource information and collaborate regularly to increase access to care during this pandemic.

Partnerships to Prevent Suicide Among SMVF:

- The Virginia Team is actively engaged at Federal, State and local levels to prevent suicide among the SMVF population.
 - **Everyone has a role in suicide prevention.**

For more information, please contact:

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